

STATEMENT OF SENATOR PHIL GRAMM

Committee on the Judiciary

Subcommittee on Immigration

“America's Workforce Needs in the 21st Century”

October 21, 1999

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide the subcommittee with my views on an issue of such importance to the people of Texas, and to our entire nation. With record low unemployment and a nationwide shortage of highly skilled workers, many U.S. high technology companies have been forced to slow their expansion, or cancel projects, and may be forced to move their operations overseas because of an inability to find qualified individuals to fill job vacancies. We will achieve our full economic potential only if we ensure that such companies can find and hire the people whose unique qualifications and specialized skills are critical to America's future success.

On July 27, 1999, I introduced the “New Workers for Economic Growth Act” (S. 1440) to increase the number of available H-1B temporary work visas used by U.S. companies to recruit and hire foreign workers of exceptional skill, particularly in high technology fields. It is cosponsored not only by you, but also by Senators Trent Lott, Mitch McConnell and Sam Brownback. This bill will ensure that the U.S. economic expansion will not be impeded by a lack of skilled workers.

Last year, the Congress temporarily increased the number of annual H-1B visas from 65,000 to 115,000 for Fiscal Years 1999 and 2000, and to 107,500 in 2001. The number of H-1B visas is scheduled to drop back to 65,000 for Fiscal Year 2002 and subsequent years. As you know, Mr. Chairman, our “New Workers for Economic Growth Act” will increase the H-1B visa cap to 200,000 for Fiscal Years 2000, 2001 and 2002. By the end of that period, we will have the data we need to make an informed decision on the number of such visas required beyond 2002. The bill retains the language of current law which protects qualified U.S. workers from being displaced by H-1B visa holders.

According to a recent study by the American Electronics Association, Texas has the fastest growing high technology industry in the country and is second only to California in the number of high technology workers. This legislation would ensure that these companies have access to highly skilled, specialized workers, in order that such businesses can continue to grow and prosper, and in doing so, create jobs and opportunity for U.S. workers.

Additionally, our bill expands work opportunities for America's retired senior citizens by removing the financial penalty which is now imposed on those who choose to continue to work while receiving Social Security and whose wages exceed specified levels. The Social Security earnings test robs senior citizens of their money, their dignity, and their right to work, and it robs our nation of their talent and wisdom.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that our legislation represents a fair and effective way to address a critical need in our Nation's economy. I appreciate the committee's attention to this important issue and

look forward to working with you in an effort to secure enactment of our proposal.